

Essential cinema footnotes

I agree with many of the earlier postings on the Essential Cinema, but I had some further thoughts after going back and looking at the Essential Cinema list and the founding statement (Manifesto and History) from Dec. 1, 1970 as printed in Sitney's *The Essential Cinema*. The film list printed there is the updated one (c. 1975), including films from the early 70s.

The collection (self-proclaimed as centering on "film as an art") was only one element of a larger project, which included the Invisible Cinema as a means of viewing, and the parallel institution of the Filmmaker's Cinematheque which had been a movable screening situation for the previous decade and which screened a very wide range of work, particularly new work. The latter was not a canonical selection device, and rather famously stood in opposition to Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 which was based in Vogel's curatorial taste. Similarly, the Filmmaker's Coop distribution project was open to all who wanted to participate.

In the Manifesto, "film as an art" is given as self-evident. Further, Sitney explains that the selection deliberately discarded historical importance as a criterion for selection. Clearly the term was somewhat wider than "experimental" since it included documentaries (*Olympia*) and dramatic narratives (*Birth of a Nation*). And it doesn't feel the need to explain what makes "*Triumph of the Will*" film art. It certainly seems that today no one tries to present *Birth of a Nation* and *Triumph of the Will* as just "art." To the extent that they are included in the canon, anyone's canon, it is as historically significant.

It seems skimpy on animation. And it recognizes no films from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, or the rest of Asia except for Japan.

There are some women represented on the list: Maya Deren, Helen Levitt, Janice Loeb, Marie Menken, Leni Riefenstahl. Part of the limits of the selection must be due to the relative ignorance of or unavailability of women's films from earlier times--something that was rapidly changing with the rise of women's film festivals starting around 1970, and feminist scholars and curators who found a neglected past. Perhaps this would explain the failure to list Germaine Dulac, for example, or perhaps West Coast artists such as Sara Kathryn Arledge. Certainly others were known

but treated with prejudice such as: Mary Ellen Bute, Shirley Clarke, Carolee Schneeman.

What is particularly notable in looking back at the late 60s and early 70s is the huge upsurge in experimental work by women filmmakers. The development of the feminist political and social movement, as well as women's film festivals and publications, inspired the flowering of filmmaking. Once you start looking for women experimental filmmakers, the number of makers and films vastly expands around 1970. Many of the best known and most recognizable women's experimental films appeared in the 1970-75 span.